Critical Analysis of Challenges Associated with Cultural Diversity

What is Multiculturalism? Should we support it? If so, why?

Within contemporary political discourse, the idea of multiculturalism reflects a debate about how to understand and respond to challenges associated with cultural diversity, based on ethnic, national and religious differences (Song, 2020). Multiculturalism refers to cultural diversity in which ethnic, religious and cultural groups cohesively live side by side in the contemporary world. According to the political philosopher, Will Kymlicka, the modern world is divided into differing ‘societal cultures’, which share values and common practises (Kymlicka, 2003), with Kymlicka regarding multiculturalism as one of the ‘primary goods’ set out in Rawls’ Theory of Justice that every person is presumed to want. (Song, 2020). Within his book, Multicultural Citizenship, Kymlicka articulates his belief that multiculturalism is an important aspect of life because it helps free individuals to devise their own specific plan for life; with Kymlicka writing from a liberal perspective in which individual freedom is intimately tied to culture (Kymlicka 2003). This essay aims to critically analyse Kymlicka’s perspective of culture being inordinately valuable to individuals, in comparison to Jeremy Waldron’s cosmopolitan perspective of multiculturalism being insignificant in helping free individuals achieve a fulfilling and flourishing life.

The concept of multiculturalism can be divided into two senses, descriptive multiculturalism and prescriptive multiculturalism. Descriptive multiculturalism at its core refers to the existing cultural diversity within contemporary society, with ethnic and religious groups cohesively living side by side. Descriptive multiculturalism is also a key normative ideal for Western liberal democratic societies (Song, 2020), with many political philosophers rejecting the idea of a ‘melting pot’ of cultures in which minority groups assimilate into the dominant culture of a country (Song, 2020). Within his work, Kymlicka has argued that the toleration of ethnic minority groups is inadequate because it does not regard those from minority groups as being equal to those belonging to the prescribed ‘common culture’. Kymlicka argues that it should be required of individuals to recognise differing minority groups and to treat these groups as being equal to those who follow other cultures or the ‘common culture’ within society; Kymlicka refers to this recognition and accommodation of minority groups as ‘group differentiated rights’ (Kymlicka, 1995 and Song, 2020). Prescriptive multiculturalism refers to a political programme that has the aim of accommodating for cultural diversity, with programmes in question introducing various policies to achieve the cultural diversity goal. Multiculturalism can also be regarded as being part of a broader political movement for greater inclusion of minority groups such as LGBT groups, women and those with disabilities (Glazer 1997, Hollinger 1995, Taylor 1992 and Song, 2020). However, contemporary political theorists focus in more detail on the recognition and inclusion of minority groups in terms of their ethnicity, nationality and religion (Song, 2020), rather than the cultural diversity of society within the modern era. Prescriptive multiculturalism is widespread within contemporary society, with many countries recognising the customs of ethnic and religious minorities via the implementation of certain exemptions such as that of the Amish community. The Amish people within the United States are not required to send their children to high school because it is not a part of their cultural beliefs to send their children to school past the age of 13 or 14; the US supreme court ruled in 1972 that Amish children should not be

required to attend high school because it violated their First Amendment right to exercise the freedom of religion (Mawdsley, n.d.).

Within his book, Multicultural Citizenships, Kymlicka focuses on his idea of a societal culture which “provides its members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, including social, religious, recreational and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres” (Kymlicka, 2003, chapter 5). Kymlicka argues that societal culture is essential for individual freedom, drawing from Rawls’ theory of justice in which Rawls describes different ‘primary goods’ which are essential to developing moral powers (Wenar, 2017). Kymlicka believes that cultural membership should be classified as a ‘primary good’ because belonging to a culture is something that he expects that every person desires because culture itself allows for shared values and common practises, which can be viewed as basic human necessities because these values and practises allow for commonality between individuals and therefore could give people a sense of belonging within society. This can be corroborated to Johann Gottfried who writes, “among elementary human needs, as basic as those for food, shelter, security and procreation is the need to belong to a particular group united by some common links” (Johann Gottfried Von Herder, paraphrased by Isaiah Berlin). Although Kymlicka and Gottfried argue that culture is an inordinate value to individuals within society because it gives them a sense of belonging, others could argue that culture may be valuable to some not all, because some individuals have been raised to follow certain cultural beliefs and practises. However, this does not mean belonging to a culture is a necessity in life because there are many people across the globe within contemporary society who do not subscribe to a specific belief system or cultural practises; some individuals may not feel as though they are ‘lost’ just because they do not follow a specific cultural institution, therefore making it possible for those without a cultural institution to live happy and flourishing lives without regarding themselves as belonging to a community. These counter arguments therefore weaken Kymlicka’s argument regarding the diffusion of cultures into one ‘common culture’ being a direct result of modernisation.

On the other hand, Kymlicka’s argument regarding the diffusion of cultures through modernisation can be supported because in some countries within contemporary society, minority groups are forced to assimilate the dominating ‘common culture’ within a specific sovereign state, therefore undermining some cultural customs. An example of this is the French government banning Islamic women from wearing the traditional burqa head dress in public spaces in 2011 because it completely covers a woman’s face, with France also going on to ban the traditional ‘burkini’ swimming dress for Islamic women, stating that it affirmed political Islam in a public space (The Islamic Veil Across Europe, 2018). This could be evidence to support Kymlicka’s idea for the need of ‘group differentiated rights’ within our modernising society because some individuals are being forced to sacrifice their own cultural beliefs and customs because they are not a part of the predominant culture within a sovereign state, thereby proving a need for the protection of culture and minority rights.

According to Gellner, societal culture is only a recent occurrence that developed alongside modernization with the two being intimately linked together (Gellner, 1983). Kymlicka describes modernization as being, ‘the diffusion throughout society of a common culture, including a standardized language, embodied in common economic, political, and educational institutions’ (Kymlicka 2003, chapter 5). Kymlicka and Gellner’s argument in regards to modernization and there being a ‘common culture’ within society can be challenged because it can be counter argued that multiculturalism has always existed because individuals from differing cultures have

co-existed on the planet for centuries before the contemporary modernization era, with some of the oldest cultural groups being traced back 72,000 years (Klein, n.d.). In addition to this, it can be argued that societal culture is merely a concept rather than a reality because there are still large groups of ethnic minorities across the globe who do not subscribe to the ‘common culture’ concept put forward by Kymlicka. An example of a cultural group dating back centuries is the Aboriginal groups of individuals in Australia, which exist in a minority to this day across the country.

Some political philosophers believe that cultures are not distinct, rather, there is no one specific culture that has been prevalent throughout time. Instead, philosophers such as Jeremy Waldron believe that cultures have been influenced throughout history by war, imperialism and migration, characterised by cultural hybridity (Song 2020). Within his work, Minority and culture, a cosmopolitan alternative, Jeremy Waldron writes, “The cosmopolitan may live all his life in one city and maintain the same citizenship throughout. But he refuses to think of himself as defined by his location or his ancestry or his citizenship or his language… he is a creature of modernity, conscious of living in a mixed up world and having a mixed up self” (Waldron, 1995). Waldron’s argument about the cosmopolitan citizen challenges Kymlicka and Gottfried’s argument that cultural belonging is a basic human necessity, something that every person desires or needs to live a flourishing and happy life because Waldron implies that there is no longer a need for people to define themselves with culture because of modernization and the amalgamation of cultures, many of which influencing each other and drawing cultural beliefs and ideas from one another. Waldron’s cosmopolitan citizen argument also undercuts the argument in favour of the protection of minority cultures, something that Kymlicka advocates within his work by calling for ‘group differentiated rights’ (Kymlicka, 1995 and Song, 2020) because it implies that there is no longer a need for the protection of minority rights because people no longer need rootedness within a culture to live a flourishing and fulfilling life; this can be corroborated to Waldron who writes, “preserving or protecting a culture runs the risk of privileging one allegedly pure version of that culture” (Waldron 1995 and Song 2020). This implies that culture is no longer a matter of necessity for people to live happy and flourishing lives, rather, belonging to a culture is now something that some may enjoy as a supplementary part to their life. Waldron also implies that the protection of one culture will disempower other versions of the same culture, which is unfavourable because it will mean that those who are not a part of the assumed ‘privileged culture’ will be disregarded and not recognised within society, thus creating another rationale to support Kymlicka’s argument in favour of the protection of minority rights.

There are many differing definitions for multiculturalism, with there being two main senses, descriptive and prescriptive multiculturalism. At its core, descriptive multiculturalism only refers to the existing diversity within contemporary society whereas prescriptive multiculturalism refers to political programmes aimed at protecting diversity. Cosmopolitan theorists such as Waldron seemingly imply that we should not support prescriptive multiculturalism because individuals no longer feel the need for a rootedness within culture to live a happy and flourishing life. It is difficult to support Waldron’s perspective in this aspect because it is easy for political institutions to exploit cultures by banning some of their customs because they do not align with the customs of the ‘common culture’. On the other hand, Waldron has a strong argument in regard to descriptive multiculturalism via the cosmopolitan citizen because contemporary society has slowly modernized and created an amalgamation of cultures that have influenced each other throughout the modern age which has somewhat diminished the differentiation between cultures, with each culture becoming analogous to one another. Kymlicka provides a stronger argument for supporting multiculturalism throughout his work because of his advocacy

for political programmes to protect and nurture specific cultures so that they do not get lost in translation towards a common culture. However, Kymlicka also has his limitations because of his belief that multiculturalism has already moved towards a societal common culture, rather than keeping to the differing individual cultures. Kymlicka's argument regarding the diffusion of cultures into one common culture is difficult to support because there are many cultures that still exist across the globe within contemporary society, with some cultures dating back centuries, proving that the diffusion of culture could be seen as a concept rather than a complete reality. Overall, I believe that multiculturalism, whether it is descriptive or prescriptive should be supported and preserved via political programmes and laws because it shapes identity and allows for individuality within society. Political programmes to support and protect cultures are also deeply important because without them, some cultures may be disregarded and not recognised within society, thus creating an unfavourable and unpredictable social environment because culture shapes our beliefs and our values which are shared with one another; this also allows for commonality between individuals, thus bringing people closer together. Without contrasting cultures within society and the political programmes to protect them, as suggested by Kymlicka, the world would be a very monotonous and possibly dangerous place.

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